

# Dala: Singer-Songwriting Duo

BY ALAN HARDIMAN

With the release this summer of its third CD, *Who Do You Think You Are*, on the heels of a successful cross-Canada tour opening for Tom Cochrane, Dala continues to draw fans devoted to its unique brand of emotionally resonant, highly accessible music. Ranging from the infectiously catchy "Marilyn Monroe" to the achingly beautiful "Hockey Sweater," the songs on the new album demonstrate a rare gift for melody and a confidence with vocal harmony – matching their considerable talents as performing artists. It doesn't hurt that they're drop-dead gorgeous either.

Dala is two women, Amanda Walther and Sheila Carabine, who came up with the moniker by combining the final syllable of each of their names. Both write, play guitar and keyboards, and sing, with Amanda usually supplying the higher harmony and Sheila shading the lines with her darker alto. They released two CDs in 2005 – the independent *This Moment is a Flash and Angels & Thieves* with Universal Music – and watched their popularity grow as they played festivals and small venues across Canada before opening for Jann Arden at Massey Hall in Toronto late in the year. Dala reached critical mass at Mariposa in 2005, when after two days of workshops playing to audiences of a dozen or so, they created such a buzz that by the third day some 400 people turned up to catch their performance.

While you can't really label their material folk music – their original compositions are tagged as pop on the iTunes Store – the response they received at Mariposa led to an invitation to appear again at the festival the following year, and in 2006 they opened the festival on the main stage.

As Dala opened Mariposa, "Feist came running out of her trailer to stand in the wings and listen to the performance. Being Feist fans, Sheila and Amanda's little hearts grew three sizes each," said producer Mike Roth, who has worked with them crafting all three

albums at his Big Bold Sun studio.

Stephen Fearing (Blackie and the Rodeo Kings) also caught them at the festival. "I loved it – they were so good. They sing the most beautiful harmonies. They're really confident, it just knocks me out," he said in an interview with Jeff Robson for Winnipeg radio station CJUM.

Tom Cochrane told me that having Dala both as his opening act and singing backup with him on his *No Stranger* tour with Red Rider was "a good call. These kids are pretty smart and they sing great. It was just a pleasure having them out – they got so much positive response. I just look over at them and I get so much energy off them. They were so pleasant but so excited to be out there. That's contagious for a bunch of jaded old bastards like us. I thrive off that and I hope we can do some more with them," he said.

Amanda and Sheila both grew up the youngest of three children and the only girls in their families. Both have fathers who are musicians.

"My family is really musical and I was brought up singing songs with my brothers and three female cousins, who have been like sisters to me. We all grew up singing," Amanda said. In high school she played bass clarinet, but her father taught her to play the mandolin and penny whistle; and there was always a piano in the house. "My big brother taught me chords and that's really what got me started. I grew up on Dire Straits. *Brothers in Arms* was the album we played constantly when I was a kid. Now, Joni Mitchell's *Blue* is the only album that stays in my CD changer all the time," she said.

Sheila grew up listening to the Beatles, Cat Stevens, and Chris de Burgh. "My brothers got into Led Zeppelin and that made me really excited about music. And then I watched the *Beatles Anthology* on TV and that's what changed it for me – suddenly music mattered to me," Sheila said. "I played classical piano growing up. I got to Grade 9 in the Royal Conservatory and then I started composing my own pieces and singing. The reason I wanted to sing – and this is a little secret – is that Amanda was a jazz singer in high school, and she sang 'I've Got You Under My Skin' in the Christmas concert. The whole room was applauding and I thought, 'Wow, I want to be a singer, too!'"

"I've always been drawn to really sad music. I have very intense memories from when I was so little that my mother was still holding me in church, and I remember weeping because the songs at Easter time were so sad for me. I've always been especially moved by the minor chords. Sad music just resonates with me," Sheila said. "Hockey Sweater" on the new album bears this out in spades. It's based on the true story of a young girl whose boyfriend leaves Canada after winning a hockey scholarship to an American university – "The ultimate Canadian romantic tragedy," opines Amanda – and she promises to wear his hockey sweater while he waits "somewhere where it never snows."

The two met six years ago in the high school band at Mary Ward Catholic School in Scarborough and have been making music together ever since. Their songs have been featured on the TV shows *Regenesis*

and *Falcon Beach*, while the video for their hit single *20 Something* reached the Number Two spot on Bravo Television and was one of the top requests on CMT. Last year they took their music to campuses across Ontario, performing at the University of Guelph, Fanshawe College, Georgian College, Algonquin College, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo University and York University. Dala also played a standing-room only show at the University of Toronto's Hart House.

Other highlights include opening for legendary songstress Buffy Sainte-Marie in Hamilton and for England's multi-talented Jamie Cullum (dubbed "Sinatra-in-sneakers" by the British press) at the Harbourfront Centre in Toronto. They also performed at the CBC's Glenn Gould Studio, sold out a double-bill show at Hugh's Room in Toronto, and played at the legendary Folk Under the Clock in Peterborough, where they sold the most CDs of any act in the 21-year history of the concert series.

They've been featured as musical guests on *Breakfast Television* in both Toronto and Vancouver, and the album *Angels & Thieves* was nominated for three Canadian Folk Music Awards – for Best New/Emerging Artist, Best Vocal Group, and Producer of the Year (Mike Roth).

The new CD is even stronger. *Who Do You Think You Are* has tight writing, compelling stories, and hauntingly memorable melodies. The harmonies are complex, sung with as near perfect intonation as you're likely to hear anywhere. The production serves the material well and doesn't hijack the music for the sake of blatant commercial appeal. New listeners are likely to be at first intrigued and then hooked, diehard fans ecstatic.



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